MARGARET JUNKIN PRESTON

AN EASTON LASS OF LONG AGO, WHO ACHIEVED DISTINCTION IN LITERATURE AND ART.

A memoir by Ethan Allen Weaver, read at the meeting of the Northampton County, Pa. Historical and Genealogical Society, held in the First Reformed Church, Easton, Penna.

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The present year marks the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of one whose early life was passed in Easton and who, through her writings both in prose and poetry, attained national distinction in the world of "belles lettres," winning for her the title of the "Poetess-Laureate of the South."

Margaret Junkin was born in Milton, Pa., May 19, 1820, the eldest child of Rev. George Junkin and Julia Rush Miller Junkin. Her parents were of that stalwart, Godly and heroic race, the Covenanters of Scotland. She used to tell her children with a mixture of pride and amusement of one of her Scotch ancestors walking to church on Sundays over a mountain ridge covered with whortleberries, without daring to pick one ripe berry for fear of the Fourth Commandment.

Dr. Junkin's life was devoted to religion and education, and at the time of his marriage he was a minister of the Presbyterian church at Milton, supplying a number of congregations and preparing young men for the ministry.

At the age of ten Margaret moved to Germantown where her father took charge of the Manual Labor Academy of Penna. Here her life was brightened by the friendship and associations with her mother's Philadelphia acquaintances and with those connected with the institution as teachers, particularly Charles F. McCay who was to Margaret an unselfish elder brother and who later accompanied Dr. Junkin to Easton as a member of the first faculty of Lafayette College. He was ten years her senior but seems to have found nothing more to his tastes than the companionship of the two little girls, Margaret and her sister Eleanor, (always familiarly known in the home and by intimate friends as Maggie and Ellie) whose studies he fostered and encouraged.

After two years at Germantown, Dr. Junkin accepted the Presidency of Lafayette College and Margaret at the age of twelve saw for the first time the beautiful "Forks of the Delaware" rich in its scenery, which no doubt gave inspiration to her in her early writings. Not only did Dr. Junkin and his family move to Easton but practically the entire institution, faculty and students. For two years the college was conducted on a farm south of the Lehigh. In the meantime a permanent site was purchased north of the town and a building constructed, the present South College, the basement and first floor of the eastern portion being specially fitted up for the occupancy of the President, to which he, Mrs. Junkin and their seven children moved in the spring of 1834 and which he occupied until his removal in 1841 to accept the presidency of Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.

Margaret's brother, the late George Junkin, Esq., of Philadelphia, writes: "My first recollection of Maggie is at the time of my youngest sister's birth (1835) in Easton, when she had the care and entertainment of the little brood, mothering us with great success." She shared the responsibilities in the caretaking of her two sisters and five brothers, she being the eldest, so that her hours for study were mostly by candle light. As a result her eyesight began to fail when she had reached the age of twenty-one and for a time she was deprived of that for which she had shown even a greater passion than that for writing, namely of painting, and crayons and water colors still in existence testify to her remarkable skill in that direction. So peering eagerly

into the mists of ninety years, we catch a glimpse of this ten year old Margaret; slight, fair with abundant auburn curls and blue eyes; quick of mind and movement; sensitive, shy, conscientious; exercising a commanding influence over the youger children, in spite of her tiny stature; tender hearted; always busy; obedient and loyal to her grave father; passionately devoter to her beautiful mother; a little house-mother nerself from her earliest years; yet even then tingling with poetry and romance, and with the ambition to be a scholar—such is the dainty figure thrown upon the warmly colored backgound of a home rich in mental and spiritual culture. In regard to her stature in after years her husband would playfully tell her—towering above her—that it was the weight of her studies in early life that had stunted her growth. There was, however, another tradition in the family as to the cause of Margaret's small size, for she had been tossed on the horns of a cow as a little toddler, a year or two old, and everybody knows the Scotch superstition which attributes to this mishap the power to dwarf a little child's growth. The association with culivated and refined people is taken for granted in a college president's family; but there was one element in her Easton training which perhaps had a great deal to do with forming her poetic and artistic tastes. This was the beautiful and highly romantic scenery of Easton, by which she was surrounded from childhood. Those who recall in earlier days the wooded hills, the fertile fields, the shining waters of this locality, can readily picture the young dreamer and artist and poetess framed in the rosy dawns and glowing sunsets, the white wintry beauty, and smiling summer fairness of such a landscape. Easton was at this time famous beyond its borders for its mental culture, two of its residents being numbered among the "Female Poets of America"—Mrs. Jane Lewars Gray and Mrs. Elizabeth Swift.

Margaret's education was received almost wholly from her parents and was widened by private lessons from the college professors and tutors. It was about this time, 1840, that she and her sister Eleanor became members of the First Presbyterian church of Easton and that her first productions in verse appeared in the columns of a local newspaper though it is known that she wrote verses at the age of sixteen. "Childhood," "The Forest Grave," and "Where Dwelleth the Scent of the Rose" were early efforts and after her removal to Oxford, O. she wrote "Lines Written on Reading Letters Bringing Sad News From Easton."

An incident illustrating Margaret Junkin's poetical talent is related by the late Rev. Thomas C. Porter, D. D. who, as a student at Lafayette (1836-1840), like many others was on close friendly terms with Dr. Junkin's family: "Seated one evening on the porch" the doctor wrote, "our talk began to flow in the usual channel. After awhile, her sister Eleanor, whose liking for poetry was not so intense, put in a remonstrance with a toujours perdrix and said in a vein of raillery, that she believed it utterly impossible for us twain to be together ten minutes without discoursing about the riders of Pegasus. We repelled the accusation. She then replied, 'Whichever of you, when we meet here again, is the first to introduce into our conversation anything of the kind, he or she must pay a forfeit and that forfeit shall be fifty lines of verse on some very hard subject.' We agreed to the terms. It was asked, 'What shall the subject be'? Many topics having been named and rejected, she chanced to look over into a neighboring field and saw there a patch of cabbage and cried in a gay tone. 'Now I have it—fifty lines on a head of cabbage! Let that be the penalty.' Of course, at our next meeting an ambiguous word or phrase supplied a sufficient pretext for my condemnation. There was no escape, I had to do it." The lines have oft been printed and aside from their merit their humor affords amusement.

It was the 30th of March, 1841, when with his family, Dr. Junkin departed from Easton for his future field of labor in the Valley of Miami. At that time there was no railroad connections between Easton and Philadelphia and a recent storm and high waters had made the ordinary connections by stage-coaches impracticable. Both the Delaware and the Lehigh were swollen beyond their banks and on a Monday morning a small fleet of Durham Boats was about to depart for Philadelphia, one of which had been comfortably fitted up for the accommodation of Dr. Junkin's family and perhaps a few others that availed themselves of that novel mode of transportation. The boats were to depart at an early hour in order to reach the city with daylight. His farewell discourse had been delivered

the preceding Sabbath to tearful crowds; but anxious to take a last look at the man and family that had won such a deep place in their affections, a large concourse of the citizens, male and female, old and young, thronged the north bank of the Lehigh where the boat lay, to greet with sorrowful farewell the man whose departure from their midst was felt to be a public loss. The morning had been cloudy and threatened rain, but that did not deter the people from thronging to the shore. After a few words of farewell addressed by a gentleman present to Dr. Junkin and his family after they were seated in the boat, the Doctor responded in a short speech marked by much feeling and bade farewell. The boat pushed off and was soon carried by the rapid current out of sight whilst the silent, and in not a few cases the sobbing crowd, waved adieu. Just then the sun broke brightly through the clouds and a pleasant day was vouchsafed to the voyagers, This demonstration of the popular feeling was entirely impromptu. Everybody seemed surprised to see everybody there and none were more taken by surprise than the travellers themselves. It was a spontaneous throb of the popular heart and as the people withdrew to their homes in silent sadness, all seemed to feel that they had lost a friend.

In 1844 when Dr. Junkin returned to Easton to again assume the Presidency of his "Lovely Lafayette" he occupied a residence in the town where he remained until 1848 when he accepted the Presidency of Washington College, now Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Va.

Upon Margaret Junkin's return to Easton she wrote "Love's Tribune to the Departed" occasioned by the death on August 20, 1845 of Mrs. Elizabeth Crane wife of Dr. F. L. Crane and daughter of the late Jesse M. Howell, Esq., and "The Fate of a Raindrop," and these she followed after going to Lexington by "Thoughts suggested by Powers' Proserpine" a beautiful work of art, then in possession of the late Judge Henry D. Maxwell, of Easton, "The Old Dominion," "The Solaced Grief," "Galileo Before the Inquisition" and "The Polish Boy."

In a letter to her childhood friend Prof. McCay, dated November 14, 1845 she wrote: "Just now we, that is the ladies of Easton, are very busily engaged in preparing for a Bazaar, after the model of the recent one held by the Philadelphia ladies. Its object is to liquidate a debt which remains upon the college, and if its results are at all commensurate with the zeal and energy displayed by our ladies, we will realize something handsome. It is to be held during Christmas week, and the affair is to be terminated by a tea party, to which all the town people are to be invited. So you see that at present I have employment for all my faculties." This bazaar was not without a sad and far reaching effect on Margaret Junkin's life, as we gather from mention made by a member of her family. Speaking of the breaking down of Margaret's eyesight, her sister says: "She did her share of the family sewing—no machines in those days—read everything she could lay her hands on, studied, practised music (she never became a good musician;) did a good deal of pencil-drawing and water-color painting—rising often at five o'clock, and studying until after midnight. All this laid the foundation for that suffering with her eyes which handicapped the later years of her life. When she was about twenty-five she had a severe attack of rheumatic fever, which continued for some months. Before she was sufficiently recovered from this, she became interested in a Bazaar which was held in Easton for Lafayette College, and did for it some fine painting, which caused the first absolute breakdown with her eyes, and from which they never really recovered." A production of hers was a copy in sepia of the pathetic head of Beatrice Cenci which now hangs on her son's wall in Baltimore.

The second farewell to Easton sharply divides Margaret Junkin's life for henceforth her lot is cast with the Southern people who eagerly claim her as their poetess and boast of her work as the product of Southern talent.

The life of Margaret Junkin at Lexington differed from that which she experienced as a young girl at Germantown, Easton, and Oxford. She had reached the age of twenty-eight and the old town in the Shenandoah Valley, with its famous educational institutions and the social atmosphere of the place, which, aside from the local culture brought many interesting personages as visitors, not to speak of the quaint life among the slaves, appealed to her. She entered into the spirit of these environments to the fullest extent and her attainments,literary and social, were fully-recognized at home and abroad. She

was enraptured with the beauty of the surroundings and made trips on horseback to points of interest in the valley continuing not only her writings but also her paintings for which she already displayed ability while a girl at Easton. She contributed many poems and short stories to religious and secular journals and to the magazines of that period, and her only novel, "Silverwood," embalming the characters of her mother, sister, and brother was published anonymously about this time.

The death of a favorite brother (Joseph) in 1849 followed by that of her mother in 1854 and only a few months later by that of her favorite sister Eleanor, brought profound grief to the Junkin household. The sister Eleanor survived only a year, her marriage in 1853 to Major Thomas J. Jackson, a graduate of West Point and a professor in the Virginia Military Institute, the West Point of the South, who later achieved fame in the war between the States and gained the sobriquet of "Stonewall" Jackson. After the death of Mrs. Jackson her husband continued to be a member of Dr. Junkin's household for four years and the affectionate regard in which he was held by the members of the Junkin family is shown in a number of Margaret's letters in which General Jackson's character and personality are more vividly shown than in any published work concerning him.

Julia, Margaret's surviving sister, in 1856 married Junius M. Fishburn, Professor of Latin in Washington College, and after the death of her husband in 1858 and only child in 1859 moved to Philadelphia residing with her brother George. Here for many years she was Treasurer of the Women's Foreign Missionary Society of the Presbyterian church, but the last seven years of her life she was an invalid in the Presbyterian Hospital where she died September 2, 1915.

Margaret Junkin had now passed the days of her youth without making any plans for matrimony, it goes without saying that lovers had not been wanting to one so gifted and attractive; she, in later years, admitted that an unfortunate episode in very early life had closed her heart during all those years of young womanhood to any thought of love or marriage. Margaret had more than once declared that if she ever married a widower and especially a widower with children, that she might be put in a straight-jacket, for she would never do such a thing while she kept her mind. She might have said while she kept her heart, for when the time came for her to love a man she was to do joyfully that very thing. On August 3, 1857 she married Major John T. L. Preston, Professor of Latin in the Virginia Military Institute, a widower with seven children—the oldest twenty-two and the youngest five. Major Preston was a typical Virginian; was educated at Washington College, University of Virginia and at Yale, the best education his country afforded in his day, and his natural gifts were of no mean order. To this family she proved to be an affectionate and loving wife and mother and they in turn reciprocated this feeling of affection. In addition to the children of Major Preston in his first marriage two sons were born to Major and Margaret Junkin Preston—George Junkin Preston, M D., for many years a successful specialist in nervous diseases, who died at his home in Baltimore twelve years ago, and Herbert Preston, now General Solicitor for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Company. The former is survived by a son Lieut. George H. Preston of the Medical Corps, United States Army, and a daughter, Margaret, living in Baltimore, and the latter by a son and daughter who are minors.

For the first four years of married life, the poet was lost in the wife, the mother, and the busy house-mistress. Mrs. Preston was a notable housekeeper. First of all she recreated her home. The place, when she came in it, was delightful as to spacious grounds, fine shade trees. attractive orchard, garden and meadow. Mrs. Preston altered and added to the house, made and kept it beautiful, tasteful, comfortable and even elegant. Members of her family used to say that with an inexpensive engraving, an ornament or two, a hammer and a box of tacks, she could furnish a room artistically. She knew where to put things with reference to one another, and how to give to the whole an indescribable air of fitness, that no expenditure of money could reproduce in those who lacked her gift. Nor did she neglect the humbler offices of a housewife. In fact the only vanity ever seen in her was in connection with her mince pies, jellies, and crullers. She seasoned the winter supply of sausage with her own hand, flavored the autumn apple butter, and the most flattering guest that ever called at her door could not entice her from the preserv-

ing kettle till the fruit was ready to be put into the jars. For several years after her marriage, indeed until the end of the war, Mrs. Preston considered it her duty—she sadly owned her mistake, afterwards—to do an immense amount of sewing, and her skill as a needlewoman was as great as if she had never written a sonnet.

The war clouds were lowering for a bitter conflict between the north and south which was to last for four years and the Junkin family became divided. The father, Rev. Dr. Junkin, a pronounced abolitionist and opposed to secession resigned the Presidency of Washington College and with his widowed daughter departed for Philadelphia where both of them resided until the end of their lives. His son William espoused the southern cause and became a Captain of Infantry and John M. served as a surgeon in the Federal Army.

The son-in-law Major Thomas J. Jackson was early appointed a Major General in the Army of Northern Virginia and as a military genius was second only to his Commander-in-Chief, General Robert E. Lee. Major Preston, though past the military age, entered the service and early in the war served on the staff of General Jackson with the rank of Colonel. A son in his first marriage was killed in the war, another was desperately wounded, losing an arm, while a third died while preparing to enter the service. But Margaret herself never foreswore allegiance to her native state, even in the dark days of the war when prejudice was most bitter. While her sympathy was with the cause of her adopted people and her prayer was for their success she believed in the honesty and patriotism of the North and bravely risked the friendship of those she loved and upon whose good will her happiness depended rather than acquiesce in the universal denunciation of "the enemy" which prevailed both North and South.

There are many letters to Mrs. Preston from her husband and "Stonewall" Jackson, as well as a journal which she kept after the beginning of the second year of the war that are of great interest to the general reader as well as to members of the family. One of the letters written by Major Preston to his wife gives a graphic account of the execution of John Brown of which he was an eye witness. There are frequent entries in her journal of the scarcity of food and fabrics and of the fabulous prices paid for each. She records making calico dresses for her baby boy out of the lining of an old dressing gown and for her son, clothes concocted from old castaways. Later she writes "I made my George a jacket out of a worn out old gingham apron and pants for another out of an old coat by piecing the sleeves together," and, "made two petticoats for Elizabeth (her stepdaughter) and self out of a window curtain. Necessity is the the mother of invention." "Cut a pair of drawers for Mr. Preston out of a sheet, not because I could well spare the sheet but because I had nothing else."

Much active campaigning took place in the Shenandoah Valley and at Lexington cannonading was distinctly heard during the engagements in the vicinity. The marching of the contending armies through Lexington, of refugees seeking safety, the burning of the buildings of the Virginia Military Institute, the denuding of Washington College and the devastation wrought by the invading army, are feelingly referred to. The news of the killing or wounding of kinsmen and neighbors, the bringing home of the wounded, and of the slain in battle for burial, are referred to without any feeling or hatred for those who were instrumental in bringing this about.

Immediately following the secession of hostilities began the rehabilitation of Virginia Military Institute and Washington College and the enrollment of students in both institutions was greater than ever before, in consequence of which a larger staff of professors came to these institutions and social activities were renewed on a larger scale. Among those who were thus brought to Lexington was General Robert E. Lee who had accepted the presidency of Washington College and a close intimacy sprang up beeween the Lees and Prestons.

Following the close of the Civil War, Mrs. Preston, aside from her manifold household duties which covered every phase of house keeping from repairing, re-upholstering, polishing of furniture, making wine and ketchup, to the mending and making of clothing, devoted much time to reviewing books for various publishers and in compiling and arranging for publication her own compositions in prose and verse, the latter resulting in the early pub-

lication of her "Beechenbrook" (1866) a book of poems voicing the sorrow and patriotism of the Southern people and of "Old Songs and New" (1870) a collection of miscellaneous poems, the best known of her writings.

These were followed by "Cartoons" (1875), "Handful of Monographs" descriptive of her trip to England and the Continent (1886,) "For Love's Sake" (1886), "Colonial Ballads and Sonnets" (1887,) "Chimes for Church Children" (1889) and "Aunt Dorothy" an old Virginia plantation story (1890). In addition to which she contributed to the Century Magazine in the early eighties some reminiscences of General Robert E. Lee and personal reminiscences of General "Stonewall" Jackson.

Among those who wrote letters complimenting Mrs. Preston upon her writings are Paul Hayne, known as a writer of patriotic and nature verses, Longfellow, Holmes, Whittier, Jean Ingelow and John Burroughs. Mrs. Preston was fervently pious and deeply interested in all matters pertaining to the Presbyterian church, especially to foreign missions and one of her poems "A Bird's Ministry" was inspired by the receipt of letters from Rev. Isidor Lowenthal, a graduate of Lafayette College during her father's second administration, whose life was spent as a missionary in India.

In 1882 Col. Preston resigned his professorship in Virginia Military Institute. His wife's infirmities, failing health, failing eyesight, increasing deafness made his constant companionship more and more necessary to her.

Every summer from 1874 to 1883 Col. and Mrs. Preston spent several months at McDonogh School near Baltimore in the home of Col. Allan who married the only daughter left to the Preston household. This stepdaughter of Mrs. Preston's was only nine years old at the time of her father's second marriage. She had known no other mother and was in all respects as Mrs. Preston's own child.

The summer of 1884, Mrs. Preston spent abroad with her husband, her oldest son, her sister and for part of the time her brothers (George and William) and their families. Except for the ill health and feeble eyesight which she had long borne, not a cloud shadowed the tour from beginning to end, not a day failed to bring its tribute of interest and pleasure and for the rest of her life Mrs. Preston's memories of that summer sweetened existence for her.

The two years following the death of her husband, July 15, 1890 she remaimed in Lexington at the home of her step-daughter. She became of course the center of this household. Each member of the family took turns in reading aloud to her through the long ear trumpet which her increasing deafness made necessary.

In the last weeks of 1892 Mrs. Preston made the trip to Baltimore where she made her home for the rest of her days, with her oldest son, Dr. George Junkin Preston, where she became the center of this Baltimore home as she had been of the Lexington one, and every member of the family brought to her invalid's chair whatever could interest and please her. She would not see strangers but there were enough old friends and kinsfolk in the city to give her many sweet hours of sociability and her second son, Herbert, who was practicing law in Baltimore devoted himself to her in daily ministry.

One of the sweetest and brightest blessings of her life God had kept for these declining years. Among Mrs. Preston's letters still preserved is one dated at Lexington, Va., June 1854 to her dear friend Professor Charles F. McCay, alluding to the birth of a little daughter whom Mr. McCay had named for Mrs. Preston's mother "Julia Junkin." This friendship struck root first in Germantown, grew apace while the Junkins lived in Easton, tenderly cherished during the quarter of a century that Mrs. Preston lived in Virginia while Mr. McCay was engaged in educational work in Georgia but its blossom flowered into beauty during those years of decline in Baltimore when the "Julia Junkin" of the Lexington letter brought the fragrance of her sweet presence into the sad old life and became the daily companion, amanuensis and comforter of her father's dearest friend.

On Sunday March 19, 1897 Mrs. Preston exchanged time for eternity, the shadows of earth for the dawn of Heaven. The following is quoted from "An Appreciation" of Margaret J.

Preston—a sketch of her fifty years of literary life by Professor James A. Harrison of the University of Virginia:

"Mrs. Preston was a true poet, whose spontaneous gift of poesy grew out of an ardent imaginative and devotional nature cultivated to the highest degree by reading and study. Her masters in the art were Religion and Enthusiasm for the Beautiful; then Longfellow, Tennyson. Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning. From all these sources the stream of poesy that naturally ran through her nature was enriched and spiritualized. To a natural gift for rhythm and cadence far beyond the usual, she added an exquisite ear for spiritual music, ever on the alert for the impalpable melodies that haunt the slopes of Parnassus and float ethereally about its laureled clefts, her glowing Celtic nature was all Southern in its passion and love of harmony; and though all American poets must stand behind the sovereign Poe in his supreme distinction, Mrs. Preston takes her place beside Lanier and Hayne and Timrod in fertility, wealth of fancy, culture, and rhythmical melodiousness of expression and feeling.

"In memory of her delicate yet vigorous work, in recognition of her varied and delightful gift, some Old Mortality might well select three of the loveliest words in our language and inscribe them on tablets of Parian: Woman, Poet, Saint."

When a friend said to Margaret Junkin Preston some years before her death, that he was keeping her letters for the life of her that would one day be written, she treated the matter as a fantastic joke. So little claim did she consider her literary work to have given her on fame's bead-roll, that her executors did not find a scrap of autobiography among her papers. It was perhaps the acceptance of her own estimate of herself in this connection that kept her family from offering to the public any memorial of her life at the time of her passing into the great beyond, but her step-daughter, Mrs. Elizabeth Randolph Preston Allan, took upon herself the labor of love in compiling and publishing in a volume replete with interest "The Life and Letters of Margaret Junkin Preston," and it is from this that the writer of this paper has, with the permission of Mrs. Allan, extracted freely most of the information contained herein. None can read the volume without a feeling of just pride in the Easton Lass of eighty years ago, whose writings, which brought her into national prominence, began with her residence in the old college building on the hilltop by the Bushkill in the Forks of the Delaware.

ETHAN ALLEN WEAVER.
Germantown, Pa.
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